

## **Brazilian indigenous mix tradition and modernity**

*Organized, indigenous people fight for their rights and register advances. Without abandoning their traditional culture, they have been able to absorb modern world innovations*

Eliana Simonetti, from Sao Paulo, Brazil

In April, for celebrating the Day of the Indigenous People, there are usually folkloric demonstrations and intellectual discussions around indigenous population. However, the theme is forgotten as soon as the season finishes – and persons lose the chance of understand an important phenomenon. These people lived in Brazil before Portuguese's arrival in the sixteenth century. Even having been victims of massacres that decimated many communities, or have lost their ancestral characteristics, they comprise a significant part of Brazilian history and culture. Nowadays, the indigenous population is growing, occupies a great stake of the Brazilian territory, and have their rights guaranteed by the country's Constitution. In several aspects, their situation has improved.

According to the World Bank, indigenous peoples represent 10% of the Americas continent's population - and are among the poorest and least favored by public policy. For almost two decades, the Organization of American States (OAS) has tried, unsuccessfully, to define their rights. The negotiations around "The American Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" begun at September 2000. In Brazil, the 2006 "7<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Negotiations" opened with a dance presentation of painted Rikbaktsa, from Mato Grosso state. Then, the Deputy Secretary-General of the OAS, Ambassador Albert Ramdin said: "We need to reach an agreement". After the reading of the project text, many times amended, the meeting approves only the article about indigenous women that recognizes the state's responsibility over the full realization of their rights and the prevention of violence. At the closure, Azelene Kaingang, representative of the Indigenous Peoples' Conclave for South America, explained: there are very controversial issues, among them the collective rights' recognition, exercise and limits. That is, the main questions.

Since 1971 Brazil has a legal statement, the "Estatuto do Indio". All those rights that cause endless international discussions are set at the 1988 Constitution. Laws, decrees and ordinances regulate it. There is no distinction between acculturated or not acculturated indigenous, guarantee of their traditionally occupied lands' possession, and the Government must protect and enforce their culture and property.

It is true that one thing is what is on paper and another what occurs in reality - a paradox not exclusive to Brazil or indigenous issues. In the real world, there are painful problems. In 2005, 38 indigenous leaders were murdered, a record in 11 years. The infant mortality rate is almost three times higher than the non-indigenous national average. Only 55% of the 580 indigenous lands are settled. Ricardo Henriques, researcher at the Institute of Applied Economic Research, published the study "Racial Inequality in Brazil: evolution of living conditions in the 90's with regard to racism". One of his conclusions: "Poverty is not democratically distributed between the races (...) perhaps new paths may be suggested by practicing tolerance in a democratic space, considering the existence of multiple cultures within the Brazilian society."

The volume of tasks to perform in Brazil is as big in the universe of the descendants of former slaves that keep original traditions and other minorities, not to mention the poor people majority of all races, colors and creeds. The indigenous people, however, do not rest. They organize themselves; disseminate their needs domestically and internationally; seek support; and end up promoting change. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) study “Demographic trends: an analysis of indigenous based on the results of the sample of population census 1991 and 2000”, the number of indigenous persons grew 150% in the 1990s. The pace is almost six times higher than the national average. There are 240 ethnic groups, most of them living in about 1 million square kilometers – 16% of Brazilian territory – and a study based on satellite images, published in the *American Journal Conservation Biology*, indicates that to contain deforestation the indigenous lands are more efficient than the national parks.

The School Census 2005 made by Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC) shows that municipal and state governments maintain 2,300 indigenous schools - each one, on average, with 70 students, four teachers and an official of the community. Between 2003 and 2005, 24,600 indigenous registered themselves to study - a jump of 17, 5% in the period - and about 8 thousand teachers were graduated. “The indicators are positive, but the picture is a kaleidoscope, with people living in different environments more or less friendly. Furthermore, the indigenous do not want only to be literate. They want to pilot jets and have knowledge in the field of quantum physics, conserving their traditions. They are active and although it is not easy to meet all their demands they have achieved important advances”, says Kleber Gesteira Matos, coordinator of MEC’s Indigenous Continuing Education, Literacy and Diversity department.

There is still the dilemma between integration and preservation. Not all indigenous ethnicities have been able to participate in the market economy and to learn the habits and the sciences of European-descendants without forgetting their roots. Consider what is happening with the language, key item of the identity of any people. There are only 25 registered indigenous languages, from more than 170 spoken in Brazil.

Maria das Dores de Oliveira, educator from Pernambuco state’s Pancararu ethnic group, wrote a handbook that relates oral and written languages for teaching the Ofayé, an idiom spoken by only 11 persons living in the city of Brasilândia, in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul. The linguist Leopoldina Araújo produced the “Cartilha Parkatejê”, an educative material which brings the alphabet, drawings and guidelines for teachers, besides Parkatejê’s songs – all recovered from the memory of the oldest people of the ethnic group from Para state. The Federal University of Pernambuco launched the first dictionary of the Hupd’ah’s language, from the upper Rio Negro, in Amazonas state, where more than 1,600 indigenous persons from 35 villages are not literate.

Another novelty is remarkable. Located 858 kilometers from Manaus, the Amazonas state’s capital, São Gabriel da Cachoeira is the country's largest indigenous population municipality - according to the IBGE, 76.3% of the Brazilian indigenous live there. São Gabriel established by law three official languages, besides the Portuguese: the Nheengatu, the Banúia and the Tucano. Public services, offices, schools, banks, churches, commerce and the media have people able to talk with the public in all these languages.

Dictionaries, books and initiatives such as Sao Gabriel da Cachoeira may help stop the process of language death but in this battle, people and teachers able to capture the interest of children are essential. The state of Santa Catarina has more than 30 indigenous schools, with 2 thousand students and 140 teachers from the Guarani, Xoclengue and Caingangue people. The state's Department of Education, Science and Technology prepare teachers to work with different curriculum and deliver lessons in Portuguese and the native language. Goias state created the Indigenous School, with bilingual education. Children of the community Buridina Mahueri, which occupies the city of Aruanã neighborhood, learn Caraja idiom and crafts, in addition to the subjects of the traditional curriculum – besides having access to computers with software for writing Caraja with particular ideograms and symbols.

A growing number of universities offer specific programs for indigenous people. Other universities open space to them in their conventional courses. Here are some examples. In 2006, 1,183 indigenous candidates enrolled in the first admission test at the Brasilia University for the courses of Medicine, Nursing, Biological Sciences, Nutrition and Pharmaceutical Sciences. Fifteen approved won scholarships under the commitment to go back to work in their communities when finished the course.

“The indigenous people are hungry of technology”, says Alvaro Tukano, from the Upper Rio Negro. Representatives from FUNAI, MEC, Brasilia University and Brazilian Institute for Information in Science and Technology had been discussing how to meet this demand. The result were the implantation of computing centers in three Tucanos' villages, the first step for constructing a digital corridor that will sprout in the Upper Rio Negro, a region inhabited by 22 ethnic groups.

There are more things going on in this area. The communities network “Indians Online” involves the Tupinambá, Pataxó-hãhãhãe and Tumbalalá, in Bahia state; Xucuru-Cariri and Caririxocó, in Alagoas state; and Pancararu, in Pernambuco state. At these villages were implanted terminals of computers connected to the Internet by satellite - is the result of an initiative of non-governmental organization (NGO) Thydewa, from Salvador, Bahia; with support from the Ministry of Culture, the National Association for Support, and the German Indian Society for Technical Cooperation.

“The world turns and no one else believes it will be possible to live only doing crafts and fishing. Everybody wants to maintain the language, the typical food, but do not tolerate isolation”, says Osélio Isidório Messias, from Macuxi ethnic group, agricultural technical of the Brazilian Agricultural Research Company (Embrapa) in Roraima state. His report about the situation in Roraima is interesting. Ten thousand indigenous persons live there. They own 10% of the state's cattle, cultivate fruit plants, have 33 Second Grade schools and 160 Macuxis are studying at Universities.

Messias also coordinate his Uapixana community for planting a kind of bean, the cowpea, source of protein, amino acids, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. “Originally this people were nomad. Today, fixed and growing population suffer lack of protein. Hence the need to restore native species of cassava and beans, which may also be commercialized and provide a source of income”. In another initiative, the Embrapa Center for Genetic Resources and Biotechnology has provided seed species to Crao traditional communities in Tocantins state. Restoring the agriculture the nutrition and quality of life improve.

The indigenous also go active in the business world. A good example is the Iauanauá, from Acre state. The tribe is composed of only 620 persons, but they are very active. "People that kept isolated and are not seen are forgotten and disregarded", says the chief Joaquim Task Yawanawa, which uses to travel with his wife, Laura Soriano Yawanawa for meetings with indigenous leaders, entrepreneurs and NGOs in the United States. Joaquim studied in Rio Branco, capital of Acre state. There, he met the CEO of Aveda, the multinational of cosmetics that were interested in red ink the annatto seed. The partnership between the Iauanauá and Aveda, connected by satellite, has more than 13 years. Each year, the tribe exports about 4 tons of annatto. Joaquim studied English in Santa Barbara, California, and learned computer graphics in San Francisco, in US. He wrote and directed a documentary movie about his people that competed for best documentary prize at the 2005 Sundance Festival.

There are entrepreneurship in other communities. The Institute Raoni, with financial support from the Belgian government, implemented three extraction oil industries in Xingu. 1,500 indigenous from three Caiapo villages that used to work mining timber and gold abandoned these activities and export more than 4 thousand liters of oil a year.

Other opportunities arise in the tourism sector. Mato Grosso state launched the Xingu roadmap, administered by the Association Puwira Wenw, created by indigenous communities. The roadmap provides the coexistence of visitors (admitted in groups of 14) with the 600 residents of Trumai and Uaurá communities. The first group, 12 Japanese tourists, landed the Xingu roadmap in the last week of March 2006.

Rogério Ferreira da Silva, from the ethnic group Terena, from Mato Grosso do Sul state. Fellow at Embrapa, he is a doctor by Londrina University, in Parana. His research about soil can contribute for the sustainability of agriculture. Rogério is an evidence of one of the lessons he usually teach the youth of his village: "With dedication and perseverance, we are able to win".